**SALT – PARSHAT KORACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**Motzaei Shabbat**

The Torah in Parashat Korach tells of the uprising led by Korach and several cohorts against Moshe’s authority. After the initial confrontation, Moshe sent a message summoning Datan and Aviram – two prominent members of the rebel group (16:12). Rashi explains that Moshe’s intent was to invite them for a peaceful conversation in the hope of achieving reconciliation. Datan and Aviram replied angrily, sending Moshe the message, “*Lo na’aleh*” (literally, “We will not go up”), refusing to go meet him. They proceeded to explain their grievance against Moshe and Aharon, whom they accused of bringing the nation out of “a land flowing with milk and honey” – referring to Egypt – in order to perish in the wilderness.

The *Midrash Yelamedeinu* (cited in *Torah Sheleima*, #96), commenting on the words, “*Lo na’aleh*,” explains that Datan and Aviram were telling Moshe, “We are sticking to our word, and we are not ‘ascending’ from the punishment of *Gehinnom*.” Based on the word “*na’aleh*,” which literally means “ascend,” the Midrash interprets this response to mean that Datan and Aviram announced their refusal to “rise” from the underworld. They understood that remaining defiant meant punishment in the afterlife, but they accepted this fate, adamantly refusing to extricate themselves from the suffering in *Gehinnom* by accepting Moshe’s invitation to resolve this conflict.

The Midrash here makes the sobering observation that people sometimes inflict great harm on themselves by refusing to compromise or reconcile to end a conflict. Very often, fights are far more damaging than losing whatever it is the two parties are fighting for. Many times, compromising or capitulating has the effect of “lifting” one from “*Gehinnom*,” from long-term suffering or unhappiness, and yet, people nevertheless prefer standing their ground. The Midrash here teaches that while giving in might outwardly appear, or feel, like opposing our best interests, in truth, in many instances, it ends up saving us the devastating, long-term anguish that fights often bring.

**Sunday**

We read in Parashat Korach of the ill-fated revolt mounted by Korach and his followers against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. The group confronted Moshe and accused him and Aharon of “*titnase’u al kehal Hashem*” – of unfairly and unjustly asserting their authority upon the entire nation (16:3). They argued that “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” – the entire nation was “sacred,” and thus had no need for Moshe and Aharon’s leadership. Korach’s followers charged that Moshe and Aharon assumed their leadership roles for vain, egotistical reasons, for their own benefit. Evidence to this nature of the uprising can be found in Moshe’s plea to God in response to this revolt, “Not one of their donkeys have I seized, nor have I done evil to even one of them” (16:15). Moshe avowed that in contrast to the rebels’ accusations, he never utilized his position of authority for any sort of personal benefit or to inflict harm upon any member of the nation.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a) adds an astonishing component to this story, stating that Korach and his followers accused Moshe of having adulterous relationships with married women in the nation. The rebels went so far as to warn their wives not to seclude themselves with Moshe – following the procedure to be followed in the case of a wife who is suspected of an adulterous affair – in order to publicize these allegations.

On one level, of course, the Gemara here demonstrates how far demagogues will go in their attempt to enrage the masses and evoke hostility towards other leadership figures. The accusation that Moshe maintained relationships with married women was preposterous, but people vying for power will, many times, stop short of nothing in attempting to besmirch their competitors. The Gemara perhaps made this comment precisely to warn against trusting accusations of wrongdoing made by leaders or aspiring leaders against their rivals, observing that such people are prone to level even the most senseless and unfounded allegations in the hope of winning the masses’ support.

Alternatively, it is possible that the Gemara’s comment is to be taken allegorically. Perhaps, the Gemara did mean that Korach and his followers actually accused Moshe of adulterous relationships, but rather that they accused him of disrupting the people’s lives. The Midrash (*Shocher Tov*, 1) describes Korach’s cynical tactics in drawing the people’s support for his uprising, relating that he concocted the story of a widow who wanted to plow her field, but then Moshe warned her of the prohibition against plowing with different species of animals simultaneously. When she planted, Moshe alerted her to the prohibition against planting different species together. When she harvested, Moshe required her to leave certain portions for the poor, and to give certain portions to a *kohen* and a *Levi*. Korach proceeded to tell of other “problems” that Moshe caused to this poor woman as she wanted to slaughter her animal so she could eat meat and use the fleece, informing her of the various obligations that apply. In the end, Korach told, this woman and her daughters sat down and wept. Korach set out to evoke the people’s ire by depicting the Torah’s laws taught by Moshe as intrusive and wreaking havoc on their day-to-day lives, not even allowing them to go about their normal affairs and tend to their basic needs. The Gemara perhaps expressed this tactic by stating that Moshe was accused of disrupting marriages by maintaining relationships with married women – a graphic illustration of how, in Korach’s portrayal, Moshe was interfering with the people’s lives.

Rav Chaim of Czernowitz, in *Be’er Mayim Chaim*, suggests a different reading of the Gemara’s comment. He writes that even the small misdeeds made by a religious leader compromises the religious standards of the entire nation, thus indirectly causing, or at least contributing to, sin. Leaders are expected to set an example of excellence and greatness in order to inspire and motivate the people to conduct themselves properly, and thus when a leader commits even a minor infraction, it can have a significant impact upon the people’s behavior. The *Be’er Mayim Chaim* thus explains that Korach and his followers charged Moshe of arrogance and egotism, claiming that this resulted in people committing grievous sins such as adultery. In essence, they blamed Moshe for all the nation’s failings and wrongdoing, charging that their failed leadership had the effect of lowering the people’s standards, and is thus responsible for all the people’s misconduct. When the Gemara speaks of Korach and his followers alleging that Moshe committed adultery, then, it refers to the blame they felt he bore for all the sins committed by *Benei Yisrael*, including the most grievous violations.

**Monday**

In the opening verses of Parashat Korach, we read of the uprising mounted by Korach and his followers against the authority of Moshe. Their claim was that the nation did not require any leadership, because “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim u-ve-tokham Hashem*” – “the entire congregation, they are all sacred, and the Lord is in their midst” 16:3). They thus asked Moshe and Aharon, “*Madu’a titnase’u al kehal Hashem*” – “Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?”

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The Klausenberger Rebbe finds significance in the word “*be-tokham*” – “in their midst” – with which Korach and his cohorts depict the people’s relationship with God. Their argument, the Rebbe explained, was that the people’s sanctity and spiritual greatness were “in their midst,” deep within their beings, in their private lives, and not outwardly visible. They faithfully served God humbly, quietly and sincerely, without any fanfare or publicity, and this is how God is to be served. And the rebels thus asked, “Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” They were, in essence, questioning the need for public religious displays, for a special priestly tribe dressed in special garb performing special rituals with great fanfare. It sufficed, in their view, for everyone to serve God “*be-tokham*,” within their private lives, and there was no need for any public spectacles. And they charged that those who were involved in public religious displays must therefore be driven by impure motives, by a desire for fame and prestige.

Moshe responded by inviting the challengers to offer incense the next day together with Aharon, whereupon God would make it clear whom He selected as *kohen gadol*: “In the morning, God will make it known His chosen one…” (16:5). The Klausenberger Rebbe explains this to mean that God, who knows the thoughts and intentions of every human being, would demonstrate whether or not Aharon was sincere in assuming his public role. It is true that some who pursue publicity and serve in public roles due so out of a desire for prestige. But it is wrong, Moshe was telling Korach and his followers, to impugn every public servant’s character, and immediately attribute unholy motives to a person’s decision to pursue such a career. Many assume public positions out of a sincere desire to have a positive impact and help steer their community and their society in the proper direction. While it is true that “*be-tokham Hashem*,” our primary service to God is to be conducted privately, out of the limelight, there is important work that needs to be done in public, and sincerely-driven, qualified individuals – such as Moshe and Aharon – deserve support, encouragement and cooperation, not unfounded suspicion and false accusations.

**Tuesday**

We read in Parashat Korach that after Korach and his followers confronted Moshe and Aharon, and challenged their authority, Moshe sent a message to two leading members of the revolt – Datan and Aviram – summoning them (16:12). Datan and Aviram responded that they refused to meet and speak with Moshe, audaciously accusing him and Aharon of bringing the nation out of “a land flowing with milk and honey” – Egypt – in order to perish in the wilderness. The Torah relates that after hearing Datan and Aviram’s response, “*Va-yichar le-Moshe me’od*” – “Moshe was exceedingly distressed” (16:15).

Moshe had already been accused of arrogantly and selfishly asserting his authority over the nation, but it seems that Datan and Aviram’s brazen response was especially upsetting, and caused him particular anguish. Rav Ovadia of Bartneura, in his *Amar Nekei*, explains that Datan and Aviram’s message distressed Moshe “because they did not reply to him at all.” They responded with mere accusations, refusing to meet to discuss the substance of the controversy, to have a constructive discussion about their grievances.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Mesilot Chaim*, elaborates further on Rav Ovadya of Bartenura’s brief remark. He explains that although fighting and discord are always harmful, when the parties agree to focus on substance, to discuss the actual content of their disagreements, there is hope that the situation could be resolved, or at least that the tensions can be diffused. As long as Moshe hoped he could have a rational, substantive discussion with Datan and Aviram, he remained optimistic about the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the conflict that had erupted. But once Datan and Aviram refused to speak, Moshe despaired.

Disagreements and arguments are all but inevitable when people work together. But if the parties are committed to speak about their disagreements openly, directly and substantively, they can be contained and not devolve into bitter conflict. Moshe’s response to Datan and Aviram’s rejection of his summons teaches us of the need to address the core substance of disagreements as a vital step towards resolving them and avoiding destructive fights.

**Wednesday**

We read in Parashat Korach that after Korach’s group of rebels confronted Moshe to challenge his and Aharon’s right to lead the nation, Moshe sent a message to two other figures in the revolt – Datan and Aviram – summoning them for a meeting. Datan and Aviram brazenly refused, announcing, “*Lo na’aleh*” – literally, “We will not ascend” (16:12), referring to their going to meet Moshe as an “ascent.”

Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, writes that in this expression – “*na’aleh*” – Datan and Aviram “compressed, in biting sarcasm, the whole hatred of their feelings.” Rav Hirsch notes the grammatical construction used by the Torah in reference to Moshe’s invitation to Datan and Aviram: “*va-yishlach…li-kro le-Datan ve-la-Aviram*…” Based on numerous prooftexts, Rav Hirsch demonstrates that this construction denotes a respectful, friendly invitation. For example, this same formulation is used later in Sefer Bamidbar (22:5,20) in reference to Balak’s invitation to Bilam to place a curse upon *Benei Yisrael*. Similarly, in Sefer Shemot (2:20), Yitro instructs his daughters to extend a warm invitation to Moshe, who had rescued them from the shepherds at the well, telling them, “*kir’en lo*…” Moshe had summoned Datan and Aviram respectfully, extending a friendly invitation. Datan and Aviram, however, interpreted the invitation as a formal summons served by a person of authority, which they resented. Rav Hirsch shows that the root *a.l.h.* (“ascend”) is occasionally used in reference to going to a superior, just as to a courthouse. In Sefer Devarim (25:7), for example, the Torah speaks of the case of a man who refuses to marry his deceased brother’s widow, and says, “*ve-alta yevimto ha-shara*” – the sister-in-law should “go up” to the court, where the *chalitza* ceremony is then performed. Likewise, in *Megilat Rut* (4:1), Boaz is described as “going up” to the court (“*U-Voaz ala ha-sha’ar*”) to settle the legal issues surrounding his purchase of Elimelekh’s property and marriage to Rut. Similarly, Rav Hirsch explains, Datan and Aviram’s response of “*lo na’aleh*” expressed their rejection of Moshe’s authority, as they had incorrectly understood his invitation as a formal summons.\

*Keli Yakar* offers a much different interpretation. He writes that Datan and Aviram presumed that Moshe had invited them in order to “cut a deal,” to offer them a prominent position in exchange for their withdrawal from the uprising. According to *Keli Yakar*, Datan and Aviram maliciously projected onto Moshe their own selfishness and political cunning, and so they thought Moshe was trying to help them save his leadership through bribery. The expression “*lo na’aleh*,” *Keli Yakar* writes, means, “we will not rise to a position under you.” Datan and Aviram were stating their refusal to accept any kind of prestigious post in exchange for helping Moshe. On this basis, *Keli Yakar* explains the rest of Datan and Aviram’s response, in which they charged that Moshe sought to assert his rule over the people despite his having brought them from “a land flowing with milk and honey” – Egypt – in order to perish in the wilderness. Their intent, according to *Keli Yakar*, was that Moshe had already fooled the nation by promising them to bring them into a “land flowing with milk and honey,” and then doing just the opposite – leading them out of such a land into the searing, barren desert. Datan and Aviram argued that Moshe could not be trusted, and so they were not accepting what they presumed was a bribe to lure them to defect from Korach’s revolt.

**Thursday**

Parashat Korach begins by telling us of the revolt against Moshe led by his cousin, Korach, whom the Torah introduces as “Korach, son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi.” Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously comments that the Torah did not go one step further, adding that Levi was the son of Yaakov, because Yaakov had specifically requested not to have his name associated with Korach’s sinful undertaking. In Yaakov’s address before his death to his second and third sons – Shimon and Levi – he announced, “*bi-khalam al teichad kevodi*” – “let me honor not be counted among their assembly” (Bereishit 49:6). The Midrash interprets this pronouncement as a request that his name not be mentioned in the context of the “assembly” arranged by Levi’s great-grandson, Korach, for the purpose of challenging the authority of Moshe and Aharon. Therefore, the Midrash comments, the Torah introduces Korach as the “son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi,” without adding, “son of Yaakov.”

What might be the significance of the omission of Yaakov’s name from this context? Why did the Midrash seek to emphasize Yaakov’s dissociation from this unfortunate episode?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in *Oznayim La-Torah*, explains that the Midrash seeks to dispel the mistaken notion that Korach’s brazen uprising could be justified on the basis of the precedent set by Yaakov. One might have considered comparing Korach’s challenge to Moshe’s right to lead the nation, with Yaakov’s challenging his older brother’s right to the family leadership. Yaakov seized an opportunity to pressure Eisav to sell him his birthright, and later, his mother had him disguise as Eisav in order to receive his father’s blessing. One could have mistakenly concluded upon evaluating Korach’s decision to challenge Moshe that he was simply following Yaakov’s example, of seizing a leadership position to which he rightly felt was entitled and of which he felt worthy. The Midrash therefore emphasizes that Yaakov must not be associated with this incident in any way. Eisav, as *Chazal* describe, was sinful and wholly unworthy of leadership, whereas Moshe was selected by God for his leadership role. And so there can be no comparison whatsoever between Yaakov’s seizing the birthright from his undeserving brother, and Korach’s ill-fated attempt to overthrow the leadership of God’s appointed prophet, Moshe Rabbeinu.

**Friday**

We read in Parashat Korach that after Korach and his cohorts challenged Moshe and Aharon’s right to exclusive leadership, Moshe turned to God in exasperation and prayed, “*Al teifen el minchatam*” – that he should not accept the rebels’ offering (16:15). The simple meaning of this prayer, as Rashi explains, is that Moshe refers to the incense offering which Korach’s 250 followers would be offering the next morning. As we read earlier (16:6-7), Moshe invited the 250 men to offer incense together with Aharon, and God would prove whom He had chosen to serve as *kohen gadol* by accepting that person’s offering. (In the end, the 250 men all perished after offering incense – 16:35.) Moshe prayed to God to intervene and quell the revolt by rejecting the offering that would be brought by those who challenged Aharon’s exclusive role to which God had assigned him.

Rashi then proceeds to cite a Midrashic reading of this verse from the *Midrash Tanchuma*. According to the Midrash, Moshe refers here not to the incense that the 250 challengers would be offering, but rather to their share in the daily *tamid* sacrifice. Each morning and afternoon, a sacrifice was brought on behalf of all *Benei Yisrael*, paid for by the *machatzit ha-shekel* tax paid by each member of the nation. All members have a share in this daily offering, and Moshe turned to God and asked that the rebels, who challenged the system of the *kohanim*’s service in the *Mishkan* which had been ordained by God Himself, should not have their portion in the daily sacrifice accepted the next morning.

Remarkably, as some have noted, Moshe found it necessary to petition God not to accept the rebels’ share in the public *tamid* offering, despite the minuscule size of that share. Moshe’s appeal, as described by the Midrash, clearly presumed that each person’s share in the *tamid* was significant, a great privilege and source of merit which Moshe felt his challengers should be denied. When we imagine this sacrifice – a sheep, with an accompanying flour offering and wine libation – being divided among all members of the nation, we realize just how small each individual’s portion is. And yet, Moshe found this infinitesimal portion significant enough to pray for the rejection of Korach’s followers’ share.

We might at times question the value and worth of our contributions to *Am Yisrael*, and wonder whether our efforts, in the grand scheme of things, are truly impactful. The Midrash’s comments to this verse are perhaps intended to teach that each and every person’s small “portion” in our nation’s “offerings” is of great significance. Each of us has a small role to fill, and we are to work towards filling it to the best of our ability. We must never feel discouraged by the seemingly small size of our role, because each individual’s efforts are precious and indispensable towards our nation’s overall success and achievement.